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The Philosophy of Poetry: Benedetto Croce and Italian Decadentism

Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) was one of the most influential Italian thinkers of the 20th century. He is mostly known for his original aesthetic theories, but he was also an eminent literary critic who wrote about numerous poets and literary works. In fact, his critiques had great influence on his aesthetic theories and cannot be ignored. In the present study, I will show, through detailed analysis of Croce's texts and the context in which he published them, how his experience as a literary critic influenced his theories on aesthetics.

Croce's aesthetic theories appeared well after the beginning of his writing career, which was then focused on concrete historical events and literary works. His first major work on aesthetics, *Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale* (*Aesthetic as a Science of Expression and General Linguistic*), was published in 1902. It was here Croce first presented his division of the spirit into four categories (intuitive cognition, conceptual cognition, economic activity and moral activity), and further asserted that art is nothing but intuitive cognition. Thus, he deduced that art must be distinguished from the other three activities of spirit (conceptual cognition, moral activity and economic activity). It is in this way that Croce explained "the independence of art", which he used to affirm that no artistic work can be reproached for a lack of morality in its content or theme.

One year after the publication of *Estetica*, Croce started to issue serial articles about Italian contemporary literature in his magazine *La Critica*. This series was compiled into four volumes of *Letteratura della nuova Italia* (*Literature of New Italy*) in 1914-1915, which are commonly used to analyze

Croce's thinking. However, the articles were heavily modified by Croce himself for the compilation. His thoughts on other writers, such as Giosuè Carducci and Gabriele d'Annunzio, greatly influenced his thinking and are important examples of exceptions or modifications of the volumes that could potentially mislead researchers on Croce's thoughts.

One of Croce's most important opinions was presented in the article entitled *Di un carattere della più recente letteratura italiana* (*On a Character of the Most Recent Italian Literature*) in which he divided Italian contemporary literature chronologically into two groups (a "healthy" group, which was represented by Carducci; and an "unhealthy" group represented by D'Annunzio, Pascoli and Fogazzaro) and expressed hostility towards Italian Decadentism for the first time. Until then, Croce had viewed Italian contemporary literature as consisting of only one group. In 1903, in fact, Croce wrote that Italian contemporary writers often attempted to revive "form" and in doing so managed to surpass the preceding era of late romanticism, which placed too much emphasis on the value of "content". Declaring the separation between the "healthy group" and the "unhealthy group" in 1907 seems to have been influenced by important writers such as Pascoli and D'Annunzio. Croce recognized a general fragmental tendency in "the most recent Italian literature" and thought that this tendency was caused by a lack of "personality". According to Croce, the "personality" of the artist is important not because the artist must be morally impeccable or should make high moral works, but because without a strong personality the works would lose the coherence that makes them art.

That period saw not only a change in Croce, but also all of Italian contemporary literature, resulting in several societies including Crepusculars and Futurists. The result had a profound effect on Croce, because the poetic form of Italian literature, which had had almost a thousand of years of tradition, was completely "broken". According to Croce, the lack of "personality" in literary works brought about the decomposition of the Italian poetic form. By the 1920s,

Croce had started to distinguish between “poesia” (poetry or poem) and “non poesia” in his critical essays. The reason he introduced this critical method is discussed in an article entitled *Ritorno su vecchi pensieri* (*Return to Old Thoughts*) that he published in 1922. In this paper, Croce explained that he sometimes preferred to use the word “poesia” over the word “arte” (art) because the latter stresses the technical side of artistic works.

Thus, Croce had begun attending the moral side of artistic works. This attention is summarized in a 1929 article of his which read: “The foundation of all poetry is therefore the human personality, and since the human personality fulfills itself morally, the foundation of all poetry is the moral conscience” (US: 20). Writings like these have suggested to some experts that Croce had contradicted his earlier theory of “the independence of art”. However, one can find that even in his later writings Croce continued to respect the distinction between art and moral activity. What had changed was Croce’s recognition, through the study of Italian contemporary literature, that to achieve true “independence of art”, it was not enough to focus strictly on artistic technique; the artist need to develop his personality and morality.